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Democratisation & new voter mobilisation in Southeast Asia: mobilising voters in Southeast Asia: take Thaksin, take Thailand

Report

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Mobilising Voters in Southeast Asia: Take **Thaksin**, Take **Thailand**

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Inspired by the way in which American and European political parties and candidates have appropriated sales and advertising techniques from the private sector, political scientists have recently created a new subfield of political marketing studies. This inter-disciplinary area of study has met with some snippy responses from more conservative academics, who prefer to understand election campaigns in terms of conventional models that emphasise, for example, voter choices between alternative policies and platforms, and the salience of grassroots campaigning by party activists. Students of political marketing, by contrast, point to the decline of party memberships and machines, and the growing sense (acutely visible in the case of Britain) that in a post-ideological area, distinctions between different parties and politicians are often matters of style rather than of substance.

While electoral studies in developed democracies have been strongly challenged by new approaches that depict voters more as consumers than as active political citizens, the study of elections in the Asia-Pacific region remain stuck in a time-warp. Influenced by over-deterministic and teleological readings of democratisation theory, most of those who work on these elections in the region are desperately seeking evidence of the emergence of 'real' political parties, which sport 'proper' ideologies, and feature complex membership and branch structures, along with 'genuine' policy platforms. In reality, many Asian countries are in the process of bypassing the entire apparatus of modern political parties, moving instead directly from elections based largely on personalism, patronage and corruption, to elections in which these traditional campaign elements are compounded and modified by hybridised parties with 'electoral professional' elements, using all the latest media and marketing techniques.

There are few better examples than Thailand, where political parties have never been the same since former premier Thaksin Shinawatra launched his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) Party in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. Capitalising on a popular mood of anti-IMF nationalism, Thaksin created a party that captured the zeitgeist, foregrounding himself as a catch-all, can-do leader who would bring the energy and creativity of the business sector to a country for too long dominated by bureaucrats, the military and the palace. Thai Rak Thai did not rely upon traditional notions of the political party: mass membership, branches and ideology were of marginal importance. At the centre lay a dynamic leader whose decisions and policies were shaped by focus groups and marketing teams, and who epitomised the idea of an electoral professional party, Southeast Asian style. Thai Rak Thai proceeded to win an impressive victory in the 2001 general elections, and successfully complete a full four year parliamentary term. After absorbing a couple of coalition partners and pulling off a second triumph in the 2005 polls, Thaksin was able to form Thailand's first elected one party administration.

The downside of Thai Rak Thai was that for all his supposed modernity, Thaksin was very reliant on the hundreds of old-style politicians whom he had brought into the party. Around half of his MPs were unreconstructed rural machine politicians, who relied upon networks of canvassers to harvest votes through personal connections and money politics. Thai Rak Thai was a schizophrenic party, adroitly bridging the old and the new. There was no real inconsistency between the rise of the professional politician and the persistence of the local boss. Both could live side-by-side in the hybridised politics epitomised by Thai Rak Thai, a party with the deeply ironic slogan 'Think new, act new'.

As Anyarat Chattharakul has shown in her study of vote-canvassers during the Thaksin era, parliamentary candidates in Thailand use sophisticated mapping techniques to classify households and communities into sympathetic, neutral and hostile categories, deploying a range of diverse election campaigning techniques to secure votes. In many traditional communities, such as slum areas or those inhabited by religious minorities, votes may be readily secured through vote-buying and by winning over key community leaders with whom strong personal connections are cultivated. In more middle class gated communities, such tactics would be utterly counterproductive; candidates need to find ways of accessing these voters to present images of themselves as sophisticated, educated and above the fray of grubby electioneering. In theory there is an enormous difference between the two styles electioneering, but Anyarat argues that in many ways the two approaches are mirror images of one another. Whilst the middle classes tend to look down on lower levels of society with a lofty disdain, reproaching them for 'selling' their votes and behaving in immoral ways that reflect their lack of education and understanding, members of the Thai middle classes are themselves engaged in dubious patronage-based deals to secure their own business interests, and to gain access to privileged domains – such as ensuring that their children can be admitted to elite schools.

In this respect, Thaksin Shinawatra and his hybridised mode of political mobilisation epitomised all the contradictions and double standards of early twenty-first century Thailand, where what purported to be new was actually based on longstanding and highly questionable social practices. Thailand was an interesting example of where older notions of the political party based on mass bureaucratic models – emphasising mass membership, branches, collective decision making and ideology – had never properly caught on, despite the persistent belief that only such parties would constitute 'real' political parties. No genuine mass bureaucratic party had ever emerged in Thailand, and with the decline of such parties worldwide, the likelihood of their ever appearing must now be considered extremely remote.

Instead, Thaksin-style hybridised, pseudo-electoral professional parties are now the order of the day. While TRT was abolished by the courts in 2007, and its successor People Power Party suffered a similar fate in 2008, the torch of Thaksinisation is still carried by the Puea Thai Party. Meanwhile the Democrat Party has adopted a similar leader-centred approach, building its image around the youthful, British-educated premier Abhisit Vejjajiva, and adopting policies and communication styles which are highly resonant of Thai Rak Thai's methods, postures and language. None of this means that electoral professionalism has truly arrived; in many parts of the country, vote-canvassing networks and money politics continue to rule the ballot box. Thailand's electoral politics remains a mass of contradictions. ■

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